

Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed Pat Bull from the West Cumbria Archaeological Society to their February meeting to talk about the history of Holme Cultram Abbey, at Abbeystown on the Wigton to Silloth road. Pat's close involvement in site excavation has been supported by her extensive archival research to expand and clarify the known history of the site, with increasingly detailed information that greatly enriched her talk this evening.

Symeon of Durham mentions a Celtic Christian site here established from Lindisfarne, but the Holme Cultram Cistercian Abbey we know today was founded in 1150 by Prince Henry, son of King David I of Scotland, on land donated by Alan of Allendale, while Abbot Ailred of Rievaulx was a guest at their court. On his return to Rievaulx, Ailred sent 12 of his Cistercian monks to found Holme Cultram on a ridge of high land above the marshes. In 1157 during the civil war, Malcolm of Scotland ceded Cumberland and Westmorland to Henry II of England, and in 1186 Christian of Whithorn was buried at Holme Cultram. The Abbey expanded rapidly, based on trading wool and excellent salt (used for fish preservation), and their iron works. Roads were very poor but the monks had leave from the king to sail the Irish Sea, and hence traded across Cumbria, Ireland and Galloway, becoming so wealthy as to attract the suspicions of Richard the Lionheart. Raids from Scotland under Alexander II began in 1204, and a chronicle records that the plunderers were drowned by a tsunami in the Solway! A stern warning that the Scots evidently failed to heed for long, as Robert the Bruce sacked Holme Cultram soon afterwards, and a remarkable effigy of his skull has survived.

While sacking Scotland, Edward I held court at Holme Cultram, issued charters and imported arms through Skinburness, whose harbour was lost in 1304 but was then rebuilt inside the spit where the Roman port had been, so food for Edward I and the monks was brought in from Ireland. Holme Cultram was important and influential, prosperous in spite of turbulent times. Their lands in the Royal Forest of Inglewood saw constant conflict with the foresters because boars and the King's deer damaged the monks' crops. Cistercian houses were founded at Newcastle, Hartlepool and Boston (for the wool trade) and Cistercian fisheries developed across Scotland. It became so important that we find Holme Cultram shown on the 14th Century Gough map, along with Workington, Carlisle, Kendal and even 'Steynemore'. But gradually the Scottish lands and fisheries were lost, many disputes arose over costly travel to the widely scattered properties, plague (probably Ebola, rather than the Black Death) decimated the population, the power and prosperity declined, discipline vanished and complaints against the monasteries led to their dissolution by Henry VIII.

In 1538 with the dissolution and closure of the monasteries, their lands and all property passed to the Crown, and the monks were dispersed, an intervention that academics now think postponed the onset of the industrial revolution by at least a century. At Holme Cultram, the Abbey was not immediately pulled down as the townspeople still needed it for protection against the Scots. In 1600 the tower fell but without casualties, and the roof caught fire while an artisan was searching for a lost chisel by the light of a burning coal! The roof was again lost in the fire of 2006, but in spite of much fuss, there has never been any money to restore it properly. The church is now half its original length, and the inner and outer boundaries have been lost, though the 2009 archaeological dig located the southwest corner of the cloisters. Comparison of today's building with a 1723 engraving shows that just the centre of the Abbey, with 6 of the 9 bays of the original nave, has survived as the Parish Church, the result of restoration begun in 1703, and further work done in 1883 and 1913. A geophysical survey by magnetometry has been used to locate some of the previous buildings,

but a resistivity technique that was also tried proved less successful as the farmer had previously bulldozed the field in question.

The earliest boundary map of the Solway in 1565 shows that Holme Cultram consisted of a group of seven chapels spread over an area of 11,658ha and enclosed by a ditch and bank, parts of which are still traceable. It is now thought that some of these seven chapel sites may be earlier than the Abbey, and work is now focussing on locating and researching them. What association was there, if any, between the early Celtic Christian religious sites of the 4th to 8th centuries and the subsequent post-Conquest Norman monasteries and churches in what are now northern England, southern Scotland and the island of Ireland? Symeon of Durham (who died after 1129) mentions a Celtic site at or near Holme Cultram; a single archive source mentions a Celtic church at Newton Arlosh and associates it with Ninian (traditionally a 4th-5th century monk); and a geophysical survey at the ruins of Rievaulx Abbey in Yorkshire recently discovered what is believed to be the ruins of an early Celtic church within the ruins of the later Abbey. Like the early desert Fathers, the Cistercian monks certainly sought out remote, solitary places but unlike them were also very much involved in trade, manufacture and exchange, and so would prefer locations close to well frequented trackways between major population centres. The possible continuity of Christian worship at these sites has become an intriguing research topic.

The talk was enriched by a wide range of illustrations to show both the sources consulted in local and national archives, and the latest information derived from the archaeological studies that are in progress. Pat concluded by answering a number of questions before being thanked and applauded very warmly by the appreciative audience.

The next talk will be on Tuesday 9th April 2013 at 7.30pm, in the Supper Room, Market Hall Appleby, when Fraser Brown, Oxford Archaeology North will talk on the The archaeology of the Carlisle Northern Distributor Road-evidence for some of the earliest Cumbrians